



Whether, in the end, you believe spiritual practice involves stages or not, authentic spirituality does involve *practice*. This is not to deny that for many people beliefs are important, faith is important, religious mythology is important. It is simply to add that, as the testimony of the world's great yogis, saints, and sages has made quite clear, authentic spirituality can also involve direct *experience* of a living Reality, disclosed immediately and intimately in the heart and consciousness of individuals, and fostered by diligent, sincere, prolonged spiritual practice. Even if you relate to spirituality as a peak experience, those peak experiences can often be specifically induced, or at least invited, by various forms of spiritual practice, such as active ritual, contemplative prayer, shamanic voyage, intensive meditation, and so forth. All of those open one to a direct experience of Spirit, and not merely beliefs or ideas about Spirit.

Therefore, don't just think differently, practice diligently.

Buddhism and the Stages of Development

I DO NOT THINK that Buddhism is the best way or the only way. And I would not especially call myself a Buddhist; I have too many affinities with Vedanta Hinduism and Christian mysticism, among many others. But one has to choose a particular path if one is to actually practice, and my path has been Buddhist. So I have ended up with Chesterton's quip: "All religions are the same, especially Buddhism."

Where I do think Buddhism excels is in its completeness. It has specific practices that address all of the higher stages of development—psychic, subtle, causal, and ultimate. And it has a graded system of practice that leads you, step by developmental step, through each of these stages, limited only by your own capacity for growth and transcendence. . . .

Tibetan Buddhism divides the overall spiritual path into three broad stages (each with several substages): the Hinayana, the Mahayana, and the Vajrayana.

The Hinayana is the foundation practice, the basic and core practice found in all schools of Buddhism. Central to this stage is the practice of *vipassana*, or insight meditation. In *vipassana*, one simply sits in a comfortable position (lotus or half-lotus if possible, cross-legged if not), and one gives "bare attention" to whatever is arising, externally and internally, without judging it, condemning it, following after it, avoiding it, or desiring it. One simply wit-

nesses it, impartially, and then lets it go. The aim of this practice is to see that the separate ego is not a real and substantial entity, but just a series of fleeting and impermanent sensations like anything else. When one realizes just how "empty" the ego is, one ceases identifying with it, defending it, worrying about it, and this in turn releases one from the chronic suffering and unhappiness that comes from defending something that isn't there. As Wei Wu Wei put it:

Why are you unhappy?
Because 99.9% of everything you think,
And everything you do,
Is for your self,
And there isn't one.

. . . As profound as this practice is, it is still not complete, because there is still a subtle dualism contained in pure witnessing awareness itself. There are many technical ways to explain this, but the simplest is: the Hinayana level aims at enlightenment for oneself but neglects the enlightenment of others. And doesn't that show that there is some trace of ego left, getting yours and neglecting others?

And so, where the Hinayana teachings stress individual enlightenment, the Mahayana teachings go one step further and also stress the enlightenment of all beings. It is thus the path, first and foremost, of compassion, and this is meant not just in a theoretical sense; there are actual practices for developing compassion in your own mind and heart.

Foremost among these practices is the one known as *tonglen*, which means "taking and sending." After one has developed a strong foundation practice in *vipassana*, one moves on to the practice of *tonglen*. This practice is so powerful and so transformative it was kept largely secret until just recently in Tibet. The practice is as follows:

In meditation, picture or visualize someone you know and love who is going through much suffering—an illness, a loss, depre-

Rest as the Witness, feel the self-contraction. As you do so, notice that the Witness is *not* the self-contraction—it is aware of it. The Witness is *free of the self-contraction*—and *you are the Witness*.

As the Witness, you are free of the self-contraction. *Rest in that Freedom*, Openness, Emptiness, Release. Feel the self-contraction, *and let it be*, just as you let all other sensations be. You don't try to get rid of the clouds, the trees, or the ego—just let them all be, and relax in the space of Freedom that you are.

From that space of Freedom—and at some unbidden point—you may notice that the *feeling* of Freedom has no inside and no outside, no center and no surround. Thoughts are floating in this Freedom, the sky is floating in this Freedom, the world is arising in this Freedom, and you are That. The sky is your head, the air is your breath, the earth is your body—it is all that close, and closer. You are the world, as long as you rest in this Freedom, which is infinite Fullness.

And so proceeds meditation, which is simply higher development, which is simply higher evolution—a transformation from unity to unity until there is simple Unity, whereupon Brahman, in an unnoticed shock of recognition and final remembrance, grins silently to itself, closes its eyes, breathes deeply, and throws itself outward for the millionth time, losing itself in its manifestations for the sport and play of all. Evolution then proceeds again, transformation by transformation, remembering more and more, unifying more and more, until every soul remembers Buddha, as Buddha, in Buddha—whereupon there is then no Buddha and no soul. And that is the final transformation. When Zen master Fa-ch'ang was dying, a squirrel screeched on the roof. "It's just this," he said, "and nothing more."



This is the world of One Taste, with no inside and no outside, no subject and no object, no in here versus out there—without beginning and without end, without ways and without means, without path and without goal. And this, as Ramana said, is the final truth.

That is what might be called a “capping exercise.” Do it, not instead of, *but in addition to*, whatever other practice you are doing—centering prayer, vipassana, prayer of the heart, zikr, zazen, yoga, etc. All of these other practices train you to enter a specific state of consciousness, *but One Taste is not a specific state*—it is compatible with any and all states, just as wetness is fully present in each and every wave of the ocean. One wave may be bigger than another wave, but it is not wetter. One Taste is the wetness of the water, not any particular wave, and therefore specific practices, such as prayer or vipassana or yoga, are *powerless* to introduce you to One Taste. All specific practices are designed to get you to a particular wave—usually a Really Big Wave—and that is fine. But One Taste is the wetness of even the smallest wave, so any wave of awareness you have right now is fine. Rest with that wave, feel the self-contraction, and stand Free.

sion, pain, anxiety, fear. As you breathe in, imagine all of that person’s suffering—in the form of dark, black, smokelike, tarlike, thick, and heavy clouds—entering your nostrils and traveling down into your heart. Hold that suffering in your heart. Then, on the out-breath, take all of your peace, freedom, health, goodness, and virtue, and send it out to the person in the form of healing, liberating light. Imagine they take it all in, and feel completely free, released, and happy. Do that for several breaths. Then imagine the town that person is in, and, on the in-breath, take in all of the suffering of that town, and send back all of your health and happiness to everyone in it. Then do that for the entire state, then the entire country, the entire planet, the universe. You are taking in all the suffering of beings everywhere and sending them back health and happiness and virtue.

When people are first introduced to this practice, their reactions are usually strong, visceral, and negative. Mine were. Take that black tar into me? Are you kidding? What if I actually get sick? This is insane, dangerous! When Kalu Rinpoche first gave these *tonglen* instructions [during a retreat], a woman stood up in the audience of about one hundred people and said what virtually everybody there was thinking:

“But what if I am doing this with someone who is really sick, and I start to get that sickness myself?”

Without hesitating Kalu said, “You should think, Oh good! It’s working!”

That was the entire point. It caught all of us “selfless Buddhists” with our egos hanging out. We would practice to get our own enlightenment, to reduce our own suffering, but take on the suffering of others, even in imagination? No way.

Tonglen is designed exactly to cut that egoic self-concern, self-promotion, and self-defense. It exchanges self for other, and thus it profoundly undercuts the subject/object dualism. It asks us to undermine the self/other dualism at exactly the point we are most afraid: getting hurt ourselves. Not just talking about having compassion for others’ suffering, but being willing to take it into our own heart and release them in exchange. This is true compassion,

the path of the Mahayana. In a sense it is the Buddhist equivalent of what Christ did: be willing to take on the sins of the world, and thus transform them (and you).

The point is fairly simple: For the true Self, or the one Self, self and other can be easily exchanged; since both are equal, it makes no difference to the only Self. Conversely, if we cannot exchange self for other, then we are locked out of one-Self awareness, locked out of pure nondual awareness. Our unwillingness to take on the suffering of others locks us into our own suffering, with no escape, because it locks us into our self, period. As William Blake put it, "Lest the Last Judgment come and find me unannihilate, and I be seized and given unto the hands of my own selfhood."

A strange thing begins to happen when one practices *tonglen* for any length of time. First of all, nobody actually gets sick. I know of no bona fide cases of anyone getting ill because of *tonglen*, although a lot of us have used that fear as an excuse not to practice it. Rather, you find that you stop recoiling in the face of suffering, both yours and others'. You stop running from pain, and instead find that you can begin to transform it by simply being willing to take it into yourself and then release it. The real changes start to happen in you, by the simple willingness to get your ego-protecting tendencies out of the way. You begin to relax the self/other tension, realizing that there is only one Self feeling all pain or enjoying all success. Why get envious of others, when there is only one Self enjoying the success? This is why the "positive" side of *tonglen* is expressed in the saying: I rejoice in the merit of others. It's the same as mine, in nondual awareness. A great "equality consciousness" develops, which undercuts pride and arrogance on the one hand, and fear and envy on the other.

When the Mahayana path of compassion is established, when the exchangeability of self and other is realized, at least to some degree, then one is ready for the Vajrayana path. The Vajrayana is based on one uncompromising principle: There is only Spirit. As one continues to undercut the subject/object duality in all its forms, it increasingly becomes obvious that all things, high or low, sacred or profane, are fully and equally perfect manifestations or ornaments of Spirit, of Buddha-mind. The entire manifest universe is recognized as a play of one's own awareness, empty, luminous, clear, radiant, unobstructed, spontaneous. One learns not so much to seek awareness as to delight in it, play with it, since there is only awareness. Vajrayana is the path of playing with awareness, with energy, with luminosity, reflecting the perennial wisdom that the universe is a play of the Divine, and you (and all sentient beings as such) are the Divine.

The Vajrayana path therefore has three main divisions. In the first (the outer tantras), you visualize Deity in front of you or on top of your head, and you imagine healing energy and light raining down and into you, conferring blessings and wisdom. This is, of course, the psychic level, where one first establishes a communion with Deity.

In the second division (the lower inner tantras), you visualize yourself as the Deity and you repeat certain syllables or mantras that represent divine speech. This is the subtle level, the level of establishing union with Divinity. And then finally, in the third division (the higher inner tantras, Mahamudra and Maha-ati), one dissolves both self and Deity in pure unmanifest emptiness, the causal level of the supreme identity. At this point, the practice no longer involves visualization or mantra recitation or concentration, but rather the realization that your own awareness, just as it is, is always already enlightened. Since all things are *already* Spirit, there is no way to *reach* Spirit. There is only Spirit in all directions, and so one simply rests in the spontaneous nature of the mind itself, effortlessly embracing all that arises as ornaments of one's own primordial experience. The unmanifest and the manifest, or emptiness and form, unite in the pure nondual play of one's own awareness—generally regarded as the ultimate state that is no state in particular.